

Services today for popular cook

Esther Clay nurtured varied clientele, all parts of Oakland

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By Bill Snyder
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Services will be held today for "Lady" Esther Clay, a soul food cook whose legendary East Oakland restaurant was both hangout and home away from home for football players and musicians.

Ms. Clay died Monday at Merritt-Peralta Hospital after a long struggle against cancer. She was 53.

"She fed the homeless, she fed the stars. It was always open house at Lady E's," said Johnny Lorigo, a friend and one-time maitre'd at Ms. Clay's restaurant on East 14th Street.

Born in Belle Place, Louisiana, Ms. Clay first worked as a waitress when she arrived in Oakland in 1962, a young mother with five children to support.

By 1967 she had opened a restaurant, first called Lady Esther's, and had started to attract hungry clients from all sections of Oakland.

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Along with her skill at the stove, there was a generous heart and an impressive dignity, friends said. Writing about her in 1980, a Tribune columnist described Ms. Clay this way: "She had a way of walking that made an empress look sloppy."

Shrimp omelettes, biscuits with gravy, steak and sausage were just some of the items on her menu.

Asked to describe what made her

restaurant, eventually called Lady E's, Ms. Clay said: "Even rich men long for simple food. It's eating for survival and enjoying it. It's the food my mother and grandmother cooked in the white man's kitchens."

Friends said that her restaurant was so popular with the Oakland Raiders that the team's owner, Al Davis, tried to get her to move south when he took the football team to Los Angeles. She was tempted, they said, but leaving Oakland was more than she could bear.

Ms. Clay retired a few years ago, and her restaurant, which is still run by family members, is now called The Southern Cafe.

She is survived by five children; daughters Deimentrius Smith, Deiadra Carter and Maralena Clay and sons James Clay and DeWayne Clay.

The service is at 1 p.m. at the Chapel of the Chimes Mortuary, 4499 Piedmont Ave.